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**Best Practice in Public Health Risk and Crisis Communication**

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The World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001, the subsequent anthrax attacks, and other recent events have heightened recognition by public health agencies of the need to enhance their risk and crisis communication skills. The threat of chemical and biological weapons, and the risk posed to human populations, presents a unique opportunity for public health agencies to assess and elevate their level of communication preparedness for all risk and crisis scenarios. Listed below is a checklist of best practices that should be included in any public health risk and crisis communication plan.

**Best Practice 1. Accept and involve stakeholders as legitimate partners.**

*Guidelines:*

- *Demonstrate respect for those affected by risk management decisions by involving people early, before important decisions are made*
- *Include in the decision making process the broad range of factors involved in determining public perceptions of risk, concern, and outrage*
- *Involve all parties that have an interest or a stake in the risk in question*
- *Use a wide range to communication channels to engage and involve people*
- *Adhere to highest ethical standards: recognize that people hold you professionally and ethically accountable*
- *Strive for win-win outcomes*

**Best Practice 2. Listen to people.**

*Guidelines:*

- *Do not make assumptions about what people know, think or want done about risks*
- *Take the time before taking action to find out what people are thinking: use techniques such as interviews, facilitated discussion groups, information exchanges, availability sessions, advisory groups, toll-free numbers, and surveys*
- *Let all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue be heard*
- *Let people know that what they said has been understood and what actions will follow*
- *Identify with your audience and try empathetically to put yourself in their place*
- *Acknowledge the validity of people's emotions*
- *Emphasize communication channels that encourage listening, feedback, participation, and dialogue*
- *Recognize that competing agendas, symbolic meanings, and broader social, cultural, economic or political considerations often exist and complicate the task of risk communication*

### **Best Practice 3. Be truthful, honest, frank, and open.**

#### *Guidelines:*

- *If an answer is unknown or uncertain, express willingness to get back to the questioner with a response within an agreed upon deadline*
- *Disclose risk information as soon as possible (emphasizing appropriate reservations about reliability); fill information vacuums*
- *Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk; do not over reassure*
- *Make corrections quickly if errors are made*
- *If in doubt, lean toward sharing more information, not less – or people may think something significant is being hidden or withheld*
- *Discuss data and information uncertainties, strengths and weaknesses – including the ones identified by other credible sources*
- *Identify worst-case estimates as such, and cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate*
- *Do not speculate, especially about worst cases*

### **Best Practice 4. Coordinate, collaborate, and partner with other credible sources**

*Guidelines:*

- *Take the time to coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications*
- *Devote effort and resources to the slow, hard work of building bridges, partnerships, and alliances with other organizations*
- *Use credible and authoritative intermediaries between you and your target audience*
- *Consult with others to determine who is best able to take the lead in responding to questions or concerns about risks: establish and document agreements*
- *Do not attack those with higher perceived credibility*
- *Cite credible sources that believe what you believe; issue communications together with, or through, other trustworthy sources*

**Best Practice 5. Meet the needs of the media.**

*Guidelines:*

- *Be accessible to reporters; respect their deadlines*
- *Prepare a limited number of key messages in advance of media interactions; take control of the interview and repeat or bridge to your key messages several times*
- *Provide information tailored to the needs of each type of media, such as sound bites and visuals for television*
- *Provide background materials on complex risk issues*
- *Say only those things that you are willing to have repeated by the media: everything you say is on the record*
- *Keep interviews short: agree with the reporter in advance about the specific topic of the interview and stick to this topic during the interview*
- *Tell the truth*
- *If you do not know the answer to a question, focus on what you do know and tell the reporter what actions you will take to get an answer*
- *Stay on message; bridge to important messages*
- *Be aware of, and respond effectively to media pitfalls and trap questions*
- *Avoid saying “no comment”*
- *Follow up on stories with praise or criticism, as warranted*
- *Work to establish long-term relationships of trust with specific editors and reporters*

## **Best Practice 6. Speak clearly and with compassion.**

### *Guidelines:*

- *Use clear, non-technical language appropriate to the target audience*
- *Use graphics and other pictorial material to clarify messages*
- *Avoid embarrassing people*
- *Respect the unique communication needs of special and diverse audiences*
- *Understand that trust is earned – do not ask or expect to be trusted by the public*
- *Express genuine empathy; acknowledge, and say, that any illness, injury or death is a tragedy and to be avoided*
- *Personalize risk data: use stories, narratives, examples, and anecdotes that make technical data come alive*
- *Avoid distant, abstract, unfeeling language about harm, deaths, injuries and illnesses*
- *Acknowledge and respond ( in words, gestures, and actions) to emotions that people express, such as anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, and helplessness*
- *Acknowledge and respond to the distinctions that the public views as important in evaluating risks*
- *Use risk comparisons to help put risks in perspective; avoid comparisons that ignore distinctions people consider important*
- *Identify specific actions that people can take to protect themselves and to maintain control of the situation at hand*
- *Be sensitive to local norms, such as speech and dress*
- *Strive for brevity, but respect a person's desire for information and offer to provide needed information within a specified period of time*
- *Always try to include a discussion of actions that are under way or can be taken.*
- *Promise only that which can be delivered, then follow through*

## **Best Practice 7. Plan thoroughly and carefully.**

### *Guidelines:*

- *Begin with clear, explicit objectives – such as providing information, establishing trust, encouraging appropriate actions, stimulating emergency response, or involving stakeholders in dialogue, partnerships, and joint problem solving*

- *Identify important stakeholders and subgroups within the audience – respect diversity and design communications for specific stakeholders*
- *Recruit spokespersons with effective presentation and personal interaction skills.*
- *Train staff – including technical staff – in basic, intermediate, and advanced risk and crisis communication skills: recognize and reward outstanding performance*
- *Anticipate questions and issues*
- *Prepare and pretest messages*
- *Carefully evaluate risk communication efforts and learn from mistakes*
- *Share what you have learned with others*